

Carrier Awards

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The Oakland Tribune newscarriers have proven once again that they are consistently topnotch by winning high honors at the Second Annual Western U.S. Newscarrier Olympics held at Marriott's Great America on Oct. 15.

Sherill Smothers, 15, came away with the top award as "Newscarrier of the Year." Smothers and two other team members, Jerome Mack, 14, and Peter Kaminsky, 15, competed with 37 other newspapers in a pentathlon of events and for more than \$3,000 in prizes. The Tribune team was the defending Newscarrier Champions of 1976.

Events included a newspaper

fold, newspaper inserting, a newspaper toss, and a bicycle obstacle course. Finalists went on to a combined and difficult event called the "collection."

Kaminsky was the firstplace winner in the "collection" event. Smothers took second place in the newspaper inserting and in the "collection".

As "Newscarrier of the Year", he was awarded a digital watch, a video game, sportswear, and the perpetual trophy to keep for one year. Last year, he was runner-up for the title.

The Oakland Tribune was named first runner-up for 1977's "Newscarrier Team of the Year."

Ex-Tribune worker wins \$6.1 million injury award

By Marina Gottschalk
Tribune staff writer

MARTINEZ — A former Oakland Tribune employee who was rendered a quadriplegic in a 1988 automobile accident has been awarded \$6.1 million by a Contra Costa Superior Court jury, which found the T-bar roof design of the man's Chevrolet Corvette to be defective.

The man, Sherrill Smothers, 30, said last night from his Suisun residence that he plans to use some of the money to help similar victims and to lobby for increased automobile safety standards.

The landmark verdict, reached Tuesday, is believed to be one of the largest awards for a personal injury in Contra Costa County.

Smothers suffered a broken neck and permanent spinal cord damage on Nov. 13, 1988. His

1984 Corvette, traveling 55 mph, was rear-ended near the Cummings Skyway exit on eastbound Interstate 880 by another car traveling about 80 mph. Smothers' car was propelled forward about 270 feet up a steep embankment and then flipped over 1½ times, said J. Gary Gwilliam, Smothers' attorney.

The roof of the car on the driver's side collapsed totally, injuring Smothers. Also in Smothers' car were his wife, Lynne Smothers, and their son, Antonio, then 6 months old. Both were relatively uninjured.

The jury concluded that the design of the Corvette's roof was defective, finding General Motors Corp. 80 percent responsible for Smothers' injury. The remaining 20 percent of the responsibility was assigned to the

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driver of the other car, who was found to be legally drunk at the time of the accident.

"I'm quite pleased but I still think they got off easy," Smothers said. "The money that they spent to defend this case could have been used to compensate me or to make safety tests on the Corvette."

Smothers said he will use part of his award "to help lobby against General Motors to get higher standards for their (car safety) tests. Something has to be done and I will do what I can to help because I don't want this to happen to someone else."

He said he also wants to locate victims of similar accident-related injuries "to give them part of the money because I know how much it costs for health care."

General Motors attorneys could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Gwilliam did not find the verdict overly large. He called it a compromise.

"It is not a runaway verdict. It is a reasonable verdict for a man who will spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair," Gwilliam said.

The Corvette's roof design has not been changed since 1984. More than 200,000 Corvettes with the same roof design have been sold by General Motors since then, and none have been recalled.

"We think GM should recall the vehicle or do something when they know the design is dangerous," said Gwilliam.

Gwilliam said that in a 1991 Insurance Institute for Highway Safety study of 134 cars, the Corvette was named the most dangerous vehicle on the road.

"We contended this was not a reasonable design. The roof should not crush him," Gwilliam said.

"The roof is weak, unsafe, defective. The T-bar was removed, and the windshield raked back to become the most slanted on the market, so that it has less structural integrity."

During the seven-week trial, GM contended that the Corvette's roof is strong, and that the structural steel cage "surrounds the driver," according to its advertisement.

Smothers grew up in East Oakland as the youngest of three children. He began working at age 12 as newspaper carrier for the Oakland Tribune, working his way up to become circulation manager.

Today, he and his wife are separated. He has joint custody of his 4-year-old son and he needs an attendant to help him with

personal needs.

— Tribune staff writer Anna Cearley contributed to this report.